Marine lieutenant testifies about Haditha deaths

by Steve Liewer

CAMP PENDLETON, California - The bloody mess that Lt. William Kallop saw when he walked into an Iraqi family's house 18 months ago took his breath away.

Minutes after one of his Marine units had pushed into the home in search of insurgents, Kallop found 10 to 15 people - including women, old men and children - dead on the living room floor. In one corner, a boy about age 6 and a girl who looked 10 or 11 huddled injured behind the corpse of a woman in a purple dress. Their mother, Kallop thought.

He saw neither weapons nor anyone who looked like an insurgent fighter. Stunned, he turned to Cpl. Hector Salinas, who had helped to "clear" the house.

"I said, 'What the hell happened here?'â€š" Kallop testified in a Camp Pendleton courtroom Tuesday. "He looked just as shocked as I was that there was a family in there."

Those victims were among 24 civilians killed Nov. 19, 2005, by a platoon of Camp Pendleton Marines in the insurgent stronghold of Haditha. On Tuesday, Kallop gave the first sworn public statements concerning what has become the most serious war-crimes allegation of the Iraq war.

Having received immunity from prosecution, Kallop testified on the opening day of a pretrial hearing for Capt. Randy W. Stone.

Stone is one of eight defendants in the Haditha case. He and three other officers face charges such as dereliction of duty and violating a lawful order for allegedly failing to properly investigate whether Kallop's platoon had committed a crime.

Four members of the platoon are charged with murder for allegedly going on a killing spree after the bomb explosion claimed one of their own.

Stone's name rarely came up during Kallop's nearly eight hours on the witness stand. Instead, the court session focused on Kallop's conduct as the only officer at the scene when most of the Haditha killings occurred.

Despite his shock at seeing the house full of slain Iraqis, Kallop said he didn't seek more details from his Marines about their killings. On Tuesday, he testified that the unit stayed within the military's rules of engagement, which allows troops to shoot at people identified as enemy combatants or in situations where they felt their lives were in danger.

"I thought the Marines had operated as best they could in an uncertain environment," Kallop said. "I had faith in my squad leader, who had told me what happened and why."

About 7:15 a.m. Nov. 19, 2005, Kallop was at a military base in Haditha when he heard a blast so loud that it shook his room. As the leader of a "quick-reaction force," he rushed to the scene, which was about two to three kilometers away.

Arriving minutes later at the intersection of two streets the military called Viper and Chestnut, he found one of his platoon's four Humvees blown up. The lifeless body of its driver, Lance Cpl. Miguel Terrazas, remained inside.

Kallop quickly organized the medical evacuation of several wounded Marines. Hearing gunfire up the road to his right, he sent a squad commanded by Staff Sgt. Frank Wuterich to clear some houses there.

Wuterich returned about 20 minutes later and said his men had cleared two houses. Kallop said he remembered Wuterich telling him that in one home, the Marines threw a grenade into a room after hearing AK-47 fire behind the door.

Kallop went to the house. That's where he discovered the carnage.

Afterward, he found five men lying dead next to a car parked near the site of the bomb blast.

Wuterich said that the vehicle had stopped just as the bomb exploded, and then its five occupants got out and started running away, Kallop testified. The Marines shot them, Kallop remembered Wuterich saying, because they were of military age and didn't heed orders to stop.

"I said, 'Roger that,' and I believed them," Kallop testified.

Lt. Col. Sean Sullivan, a prosecutor, questioned Kallop about his training in the military's war laws. Sullivan asked whether Kallop knew he had to report the killing of civilians to his superiors.

Kallop testified that his main priority was to support his Marines, who might have been traumatized by the loss of Terrazas.

"I said, 'OK, there was a (lousy) outcome. But you guys were trying to do the right thing,'â€š" Kallop recalled.

Kallop was the first of about 25 witnesses scheduled to testify in Stone's weeklong pretrial session, which is known as an Article 32 hearing. The proceeding, similar to a grand-jury investigation, is to help determine whether Stone should proceed to trial.

Staff writer J. Harry Jones contributed to this report.

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